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ABSTRACT

Ethnographers have traditionally encountered problems in conducting qualitative research in elite settings. The powerful, in this case, the administrative and political elite in the United Kingdom, have considerable constitutional, legal, and cultural resources that enable them to deflect or channel any research in which they are the objects of inquiry. The United Kingdom, unlike the United States, has no framework of rights that compels the state to disclose information to its citizens. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the policymaking process for grant-maintained (GM) schools in the United Kingdom, which a focus on the obstacles encountered in interviewing the policymaking elite. Interviews were conducted with two groups that had considerable influence on the GM schools' policy: (1) six civil servants who were directly involved in drafting policy details; and (2) two male Conservative education ministers. One obvious danger to researchers is that they will simply reproduce the discourse of the powerful. However, narrative accounts can be analyzed to illustrate the rules they create and reproduce, and the context within which they were generated. (LMI)

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BRIEF ENCOUNTERS : RESEARCHING EDUCATION POLICY MAKING IN ELITE SETTINGS

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BRIEF ENCOUNTERS : RESEARCHING EDUCATION POLICY-MAKING IN ELITE SETTINGS

Introduction

While ethnographers may argue that their research gives a 'voice' to the socially disadvantaged and politically under-represented, who are effectively silenced by the system in which they are situated, it is also the case, as Hunter argues, that their relative powerlessness is demonstrated by the frequency with which academics visit and record their lives (Hunter, 1993). In contrast, the powerful - in this case the UK administrative and political elite - have considerable constitutional, legal and cultural resources which enable them to deflect or channel any research in which they are the object of enquiry. The power they exercise is reflected both in the paucity of qualitative studies about elites, in this case in education, and in the kind of research which is directed at them. The classroom, or 'street corner society' can be observed in minute detail, but the same cannot be said about the interactional exchanges at the departments of state, or in ministers' offices.

Interviewing public officials in the UK, whether elected or appointed, amounts to researching the state, whether or not this is the primary purpose of the research. In so doing, researchers find themselves up against a battery of laws and regulations designed to protect 'official secrets' (which translates into a miscellany information the state finds inconvenient to make public). Moreover, they also meet a Whitehall culture which prevails against the disclosure of information to outsiders. Clearly these features have an important bearing on the kinds of accounts that can be produced policy-making, policy-makers and also of the inter-connecting networks of influence and interaction. These also constrain the kinds of research methods that can be employed.

The UK, for example, does not have a framework of rights, comparable with those in the US, embedded in a written constitution or set out in legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act. It is thus more difficult for UK citizens to compel the state to disclose information it holds about them, and additionally reveal details about the policy-making process.

As we write a protracted inquiry into the politics of policy-making in the UK, the Scott Inquiry, is evidence of how difficult it is to prise from the political and administrative elite insights into decision-making. Even more arduous has been the task of identifying anyone who will take responsibility for those decisions.

The Scott Inquiry is formal inquiry, headed by a High Court Judge, concerned to investigate the propriety of UK involvement in the covert supply of arms to Iraq in the period immediately prior to the Gulf War. Moreover, it is also investigating the state's willingness to withhold documents, under a so called 'certificate' public interest immunity, relevant to the trial of several businessmen charged with breaking an 'embargo' and supplying arms to an enemy. These documents would have revealed that government policy, unannounced, had shifted, in effect lifting the embargo and moreover permitted trade with Iraq. Unlike similar investigations in the US however, its proceedings are not televised although one past prime minister (Mrs Thatcher) and the current one, John Major, have appeared before it to give evidence, as have other senior ministers and civil servants.

What the Scott Inquiry has revealed, and thus its relevance to this paper, is the extent to which, the cycle of Whitehall policy-making is closed, secret, and moreover conducted in a language so arcane that the general public sometimes feels on the one hand linguistically challenged, on the other, incredulous that it could count as intelligible communication. Indeed this was brought to a head by the recent attempts of the Head of the Civil Service, Sir Robin Butler, attempts to

portray how ministerial responses to parliament could be 'accurate' and 'true' even if they provided only 'half a picture' and were only 'half an answer' (Observer, 1994). Commentators are still puzzling about that one.

None of this, however, is intended to render the US system as a paragon of virtue. These observations are intended to outline the institutional and cultural features of the British state which shape the approach of qualitative researchers seeking to engage with it. What follows below, is an attempt to fix an experience of researching the state via interviews with public officials, and an opportunity to reflect on methods and outcomes.

The Research

In this paper we will focus on two groups of people whom we interviewed and who exerted considerable influence on the defining features of grant-maintained (GM) schools policy. The first set of interviewees comprises six civil servants, three men and three women, who were directly involved in drafting the policy's administrative details, and who had the further responsibility for translating legislation into practice. The other comprises two male Conservative education ministers.

The contribution that qualitative research can make to an understanding of the processes, practice and substance of educational policy-making need not be elaborated here. There are a number of substantive studies which have employed qualitative, interpretative methodology, within a variety of conceptual frameworks, which bear witness to the contribution this approach has made to the study of educational policy-making (e.g. Kogan, 1975; Ozga, 1987; Ball, 1990; McPherson and Raab, 1988; Edwards, Fitz and Whitty, 1989; Gewirtz and Ozga, 1990). It was in that light that we sought access to, and conducted interviews with, key actors associated with the formulation and development of GM schools policy.

We undertook this element of our research with a number of objectives in mind. First, the interviews with people actively engaged in the policy-making process were intended to provide insights into, and details of, educational policy-making otherwise not available in documentary form and thus not in the public domain. Second, the interviews were intended to clarify, confirm or adjust existing published accounts of the formulation of GM schools policy and, as and where necessary, contribute to the construction of new and different narrative accounts. Third, the interviews were also conducted to assist the identification and understanding of the networks of individuals and agencies involved in contemporary policy-making in education and the relative influence they exercised. Fourth, following McPherson and Raab (1988), we were concerned to familiarise ourselves with the 'assumptive worlds' of policy-makers, and thus explore the ideas and values of key actors who were involved in setting the policy in motion and who had influenced its substance and the course of its progress. A detailed account of these influences on our work is reported in our study of policy-making in the DES (Fitz and Halpin, 1991).

We have focused in this paper on this aspect of our research because it took us into elite settings with which we were unfamiliar. For the purpose of this study we take elite settings to mean state institutional locations in which national policy is devised and translated into directives. By virtue of their institutional locations and positions, therefore, our interviewees had a greater capacity to shape public events and meanings than either we, or other interviewees in our study, possessed. That situation had important implications for the manner in which we conducted this element of our research, for the nature of the data we collected and for our construction and narration of policy-making in education.

The paper's focus on groups of administrators and senior politicians, moreover, has the considerable advantage from the outset of suggesting that power is unequally distributed and differentially

exercised, even amongst those described for the purpose of this study as 'the powerful'. In research terms it also enables us to report, how we related in different ways to different groupings of powerful individuals and the relative effects this had on the research we conducted.

What follows broadly reflects the sequence of our research. The sequence itself illuminates the uneven pace at which this element of our research proceeded. The events unfolded not by design, but because this was the only path that we could negotiate. One attribute of the powerful is that they are able to make you wait and thus determine the organisation and the pace of research.

In the next section, however, we discuss the general procedures we adopted in all of our interviews and the thinking that lay behind our methods of enquiry. The third section reports on our interviews with civil servants, all of whom were directly involved in taking the policy forward to legislation and some of whom were still engaged in transforming policy into practice at the time we interviewed them. The fourth section discusses the data from our interviews with DES officials. The final section focuses on our interviews with ministers.

Methods of Enquiry

When we commenced our research project, three factors guided our investigation of policy-making at the centre. First, we were convinced that those individuals involved in policy-generation and implementation had a story to tell and thus we intended to provide an opportunity for them to tell it. In turn, this was also our concern, as Stephen Ball has put it, to move beyond 'commentary and critique' towards a more complex, empirically-based understanding of the policy processes associated with the Education Reform Act (Ball, 1990). Through our interviews we aimed to ask individuals directly about their involvement in GM schools policy, about their motives, about their contributions to its construction and about the difficulties involved, and who else, to

their knowledge, had been involved and their relative influence on the policy's development.

Second, we knew from the outset of our enquiries that we were researching a politically sensitive policy. The government had given GM schools policy a high profile in its 1987 election campaign (Thatcher, 1993). In the run up to, and during, the election, and throughout its passage from bill to legislation, the policy met with hostile criticism from opposition politicians and from a broad spectrum of educationalists in local government, higher education and in schools. The government remained robust in its advocacy of the policy and at the time our research commenced, which coincided with the opening of the first group of GM schools, it was, alongside the National Curriculum, the most importance of their reforms.

Third, the institutional location of our intended interviewees suggested that it would be unlikely they would agree to any intensive or long-term observationally-based investigation. It was unlikely, we believed, that any request to observe policy-makers at work over an extended period of time would be granted. We knew of no studies of this kind. Indeed, the Official Secrets Act makes such research difficult if not impossible. We also anticipated that key actors were unlikely to agree to off-the-record interviews in informal surroundings. We, therefore, requested interviews with individuals in their professional and/or party political capacity. In the case of civil servants we undertook not to identify any of our respondents in any reports of our research. Indeed, we believe it is unlikely that civil servants would agree to be involved in policy research unless, or until, anonymity is assured.

We also limited the scope of our inquiries, in the first instance, to individuals who had been publicly identified as being involved in the generation and promotion of GM schools policy or, in the case of civil servants, those who had been directly involved with it in the course of their departmental duties. We did not approach retired policy makers

(as did Gewirtz and Ozga, op cit) whose views may have contributed to placing GM schools policy in a broader historical and policy context. This was largely determined by the time we had available to pursue these inquiries.

These considerations influenced our selection and use of the semi-structured interview as the main research instrument. The nature of the data we collected and its strengths and limitations was consequent upon this decision. The interview schedule was composed of a list of open-ended questions which were put to the interviewees. It was semi-structured in that the same schedule was used for all civil servant interviewees. Thus they were all asked the same questions in broadly the same sequence. The schedules devised for ministers reflected their different location within the policy process. Other researchers, such as Ozga and Gewirtz and Ball adopted a more open framework (Gewirtz and Ozga, 1990; Ball, 1990).

However, in the fieldwork settings in which our research was to be conducted, the semi-structured interview offered a number of appealing features. Not only was it a technique with which we were familiar, it offered us the possibility of exerting some control of interviews conducted in difficult situations. Thus, existence of schedule was intended to act as a foil to interviewees, many of whom were used either to being deferred and listened to, or 'just talking' to their own agenda (Ostrander, 1993). In other words, it was a device through which we could retain some control in situations where we wished to elicit information from individuals whose professional and institutional locations suggested that they were skilled at releasing very little. The schedule was also intended to supplement our documentary researches which had identified gaps in the narrative of policy development. We hoped too, that it would open up new issues to explore further and elsewhere. This preparatory work provided the substance of the open-ended questions on the schedule and which in turn was intended to provide opportunities for respondents to take the

account forward, with the possibility of it moving in unanticipated directions.

The schedule also served as a prompt sheet. We also found it useful to give potential interviewees a copy of the schedule in order to indicate the areas we would explore in the course of the interview and also assure them that adequate opportunities existed to comment on a broad range of issues. This technique provided an opportunity for interviewees to organise their thoughts. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews, however, was not to validate or authenticate one account against another, but to hear about the policy features and processes from a number of perspectives and thus enable us to construct a more complex and more finely-grained narrative account and interpretation of the GM schools policy's purposes, its formulation and intended effects.

In addition to the choice of semi-structured interviews, two other decisions underpinned our method of inquiry. First, wherever possible we wished to have for the record a transcript of the interviews we conducted. We therefore requested, and in every case received, permission to make an audio tape of the interview for later transcription. The transcripts were to serve as a research record and as historical documents of the development of GM schools policy.

Second, in all exchanges reported in this paper there were two interviewers. Curiosity was the principal factor here. We were each interested to hear the accounts at first hand and to observe the environments in which the interviewees routinely operated. There were other benefits which emerged as the research progressed. Working as a pair enabled one interviewer to be fully involved with the interviewee while the other superintended the tape machine, took notes and asked supplementary questions. In some instances it was a technique which facilitated a more conversational quality to interview. The second interviewer also acted effectively as a 'second' pair of

eyes and ears, picking up details overlooked by the lead interviewer. In the field, it was an arrangement that also assisted the interviews to progress smoothly in situations where we were conscious that time was limited and always pressing.

The advantage of two interviewers, however, was fully realised at the conclusion of each interview. In local cafe or convenient pub we discussed and noted on the schedule the significance of what we had heard. These informal conversations were the initial and often the most important stage in data analysis. Working as a pair had one other advantage. We were researchers working in settings somewhat unfamiliar and at times somewhat intimidating (one of us recalls sitting on his hands during one interview to hide the fact that they were shaking). The process of negotiating the way through an interview in these situations was considerably eased with a colleague in support. Working as a pair is also especially helpful in those circumstances where the interviewee is accompanied by advisers. In one case, for example, there were three other people in the room monitoring our meeting with a minister.

Looking back, and comparing and sharing our experience with other researchers, it was unusual to have had extensive access to have had extensive access to politicians and policy-makers. We believe research council funding, via the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) contributed to our credibility as serious researchers. Moreover, the civil servant who acted as our gatekeeper and organised our contacts with other officials and ministers had recently joined the Department of Education and Science (DES) from the ESRC. Following established convention and practice also eased the progress of research. We assiduously wrote seeking permission to interview, sent out resumes of the research and its intentions, and kept ourselves informed about our schools policy that underwent some rapid adjustments during the time we were in the field.

These research practices helped us in the field and, more important, to stay in it. One of the lessons of researching policy communities, or networks is that the individuals in it communicate with each other, and about you and your research. Staying in is often dependent upon not making mistakes. How all the above elements came together as acts of research in the field will be discussed in further detail below.

Another Country : Interviewing Civil Servants

The door off Whitehall was somewhat inconspicuous, quite unlike the portals of the Treasury for example. The foyer was functional. At the reception desk the porters checked our names against the appointments log and then telephoned our interviewee. Prior to meeting our interviewee, however, we were each invited to step into what resembled a transparent plastic cylinder. Inside a stream of air flowed around us which, we later assumed, sniffed for explosives. We were greeted and then led down a long passage. The corridors of power were constructed of Tudor brick. We turned off the corridor in to a group of small offices where two or three people were at work at their personal computers. We were taken through the outer offices to a larger room where the interview took place. This very large room stands on the site of what was once Henry V's cockpit.

Viewers of 'Yes Minister' will be familiar with Sir Humphrey's office, a replica, and an accurate one, of the room in which we stood. High ceilings, extensive wooden panelling, writing desk, and a suite of blue plush velvet sofas and armchairs arranged around a large fireplace furnished the interview setting. Display cabinets of porcelain dominated one end of the room, and photographs of the chief secretary to the cabinet and head of the Civil Service with his predecessor were arranged on the mantle piece. We sat in the armchairs, accepted coffee, explained the purpose of our research, sought permission to tape record, and then began to ask our questions.

This episode is described in detail because it contains some of the key elements of the conduct of research of interviews with powerful people in elite settings. One aspect of political and administrative power is that it is exercised behind the protection of gatekeepers and multi-layered gate keeping processes. Although the experience, we report here, was somewhat unusual, those researchers who have recently visited the Palace of Westminster, and its associated annexes and Civil Service Departments, will be familiar with uniformed porters controlling access to elected representative and to administrators. But these are only the visible signs of a larger process. Gate keeping, the process of sifting application to interview policy makers at the centre extends well beyond the issue of passes at the lodges of government buildings, and is evident in the paucity of empirical educational policy research conducted in and around Whitehall.

This encounter, while somewhat untypical, nevertheless captures some of the experience of conducting research in unfamiliar and intimidating surroundings. It was the administrators' territory, a habitat with which they were familiar and in which they felt comfortable and confident. Thus, the 'reality' which was narrated and recorded was inevitably highly constrained. We glimpsed an unfamiliar world which was only ever partially revealed. We were not privy, for example, to situations in which political skills and reputations of ministers were discussed, where civil service careers were forensically dissected.

Little has been said thus far about the substance of this and other similar interviews we conducted with civil servants. How these were conducted requires a further form of contextualization. As the research progressed we became increasingly aware that in our interviews with civil servants we were involved in exchanges with individuals who were visible bearers of specific historical, cultural, linguistic and constitutional traditions which constituted together a discourse within which research becomes enmeshed and to a considerable degree reproduces. That was brought home to us in

concrete terms by the first, and most senior, of the six civil servants we interviewed. Before the interview, he said, we should not assume there existed, nor therefore, should we seek to explore, any differences or divisions between himself, his ministers and other civil servants. When it came to policy determination, whatever advice may have been given, ministers and officials were at one as a department. We have already referred to gate keeping and the variety of forms it took. Here was another, an explicit, uncoded statement of the rules of the game. Indeed, this was the line adopted by another, more junior civil servant in a later interview. We were exploring with him the changing nature of the relationship between central government and local authorities. In this connection we wondered "if the policy objectives within this branch (Schools Branch 4) were actually in conflict with some of the policy intentions of Schools Branch 1". After a very long pause, the official responded "we are one indivisible department (Civil Servant B)". The interview then moved on to other issues.

In an exchange with the senior civil servant, previously mentioned, we also tried to open up the discussion about the internal circuits of policy-making:

Q. Let me go back to question about consultation. What about other departments of state. Were other departments of state consulted or talked to about this policy (GM schools policy) before it emerged ..... in the consultative document?

A. Yes, but you won't expect me to specify more than that. (Civil Servant A)

Thus, the policy options which civil servants put before ministers, which other departments had been consulted and why this one course of action had been adopted and not others, were questions which we were able to pursue only obliquely and, on the whole with little

success. On the other hand, none of our respondents volunteered any comment on the options laid before ministers, even when we suggested in round about ways that ministers in practice routinely devised policy in the light of several courses of action proposed by their officials. These methodological constraints, however, have to be seen in the context of recent and on-going struggles about civil service accountability (e.g. Ponting, 1986). The important point here is that, when conducting qualitative, interview based research, thinking about the nature of the data and the form of its analysis has to refer to a larger historical political and historical canvas.

What civil servants may disclose on a professional basis is governed by several overlapping frameworks. The first, the Official Secrets Act can be interpreted to be so all-embracing as to cover all policy related documents. According to one non-departmental informant, the DES were over-zealous in this regard. He recalled, for example, that the DES would regard as 'secret', even low level demographic statistics. While the DES may have been over-scrupulous in these matters, the point is that officials work in an environment where they are predisposed to disclose very little.

Second, they also work within conventions, notably the Osmotherly Rules, which state that the policy advice they provide is privileged information. Thus, officials have the right, notably exercised by Toby Weaver, a former Deputy Secretary in the DES, not to disclose, even to parliamentary committees, their professional communications with ministers. This has been recently complemented by guide-lines drafted by Sir Robert Armstrong, a former Cabinet Secretary, in the wake of the prosecution of Clive Ponting and Sarah Tisdall, civil servants who made public material that caused some ministerial embarrassment. The Armstrong guide-lines clarify the line of civil service accountability. In the first instance was to be to ministers, not parliament or the general public.

In addition to these constitutional constraints there is a class cultural dimension which also is central to a full appreciation of policy research at this level. This relates to attributes of individual recruited into the civil service and who work within the conventions we outlined above. It remains the case that of the 'fast track' civil servants, that is those selected for future advancement to high office, and who have frequent direct contact with ministers, about half still come from Oxbridge and independent school backgrounds (Guardian, 1993; Burnham and Jones, 1993). We were not 'public school', nor had we been to Oxbridge. In interview situations, we encountered individuals who, by selection and training, had the capacity to present their department's case clearly and persuasively. They were at ease with the demands made of them to present well-developed accounts of a policy's features and its intentions. We joked that these were respondents who set out their case not only in correct connected English sentences, but in paragraphs as well. These cultural features were articulated with our respondents ability to work successfully within the conventions of civil service life.

We have dwelt on these details because 'studying up' inevitably involves researchers coming to understand the conventions which create and reproduce particular forms of policy making practice, some of which are uniquely British. At the interpersonal level, and in the data we collected, in what form were these conventions manifest?

First, they appear as a distinctive civil service 'voice', evident in all our transcripts. Officials speak only for and on behalf of departments. In substance, then, they talk about policy features and intentions, but always within the context of government policy in general and departmental policy in particular. Ask to justify aspects of policy, responses begin, 'Ministers would argue .....' or variations on this theme. For example:

> "Well I think the answer ministers would give to that is that the two are not inconsistent. The National Curriculum applies in such a way that it is still entirely possible for a school to weight its curriculum one way or the other if it wants to."
>
> (Civil Servant C)

They are, also, concerned that there should be no distinction between their utterances and the 'departmental view':

> "I am less well qualified to talk about the department's views on teachers, except again the one's I met in the Inner London context. They seem to be working hard in very difficult conditions and a lot of them are doing well in difficult conditions, so I hope the department isn't quite as arrogant as the picture painted."
>
> (Civil Servant D)

The interviews, in character, read very much like fluent exegeses of government thinking at the time. Accordingly, in nine hours of such interviewing, we heard few expressions of officials' personal opinions or dispositions, which contrasts with the way in which local authority officials chose to answer our questions.

Second, our interviewees readily talked about the processes of policy-making in the department, even though they refused to discuss either the substance of exchanges or the individuals involved. Thus, they provide an interesting insight into the way departments respond to the demands of steering a major piece of legislation through parliament. Indeed, two of our interviewees had been seconded to the DES from other departments to give them experience of the process and strengthen in-house resources. In other words it is a discourse which fosters the disclosure of the technicalities of policy-making, but not discussion of its value assumptions or the various commitments of politicians and ministers and how these influenced policy outcomes.

The DES and GM Schools Policy

With these limitations in mind the question must be posed, were the interviews worth doing, and what did we get from them? Our respondents were consistent in their claim that this was a policy 'political', rather than 'administrative' in its origin. GM schools policy originated outside the DES. Other aspects of the 1988 Act, notably a national curriculum, and the devolution of school budgets (which became the Local Management of Schools), had been subject to considerable discussion and development within the department prior to the Act. In other words, the officials were responsible for devising the detailed procedures which enabled schools to leave the control of LEAs, the idea of opting out was not one they had first thought of and subsequently championed. Even so, there was evidence, in our transcripts, that officials had come to believe that the policy would be effective, in raising standards via the new autonomy they had to manage their own affairs. (One official noted that she was somewhat hostile to the policy when it was first introduced. For her "it was an extra tier of bureaucracy, something we could do without ..... but by the end I was coming round to think, well! She added that schools had succeeded against the odds:

> "Yes, almost inverse to the amount of hostility that the (local education) authorities had put into opposing it. That actually galvanised the schools against the enemy, and, maybe it's the wartime spirit of something like that. It really did seem to be releasing something.
>
> (Civil Servant C)

There is, also, evidence in our interviews that some civil servants were comfortable in employing the discourse of the market. GM schools policy was one policy initiative designed to expand parental choice and enhance competition between schools. Indeed, one civil servant had an almost Social Darwinian view of policy evaluation:

> "In my view one of the best tests of the policy will be whether those schools that we consider the weakest ones, and I am not going to tell you a list of those, but we have a list, whether they really do gear themselves up and whether or not they change.
>
> (Civil Servant A)

In this instance, the interview data can be interpreted as further evidence of civil service retinence, but also of the extent to which an administrative elite has incorporated 'choice' and 'diversity' into its discourse on education. The policy was justified on the grounds that it would bring 'competition' into the system and would 'shake up' local authority education services, the beneficial effects of which would be higher standards.

We were struck, also, by the effort taken to place GM and local authority schools on a 'level playing field' in respect of their funding and in terms of admissions. In order to demonstrate that autonomous schools, free of local bureaucracy, can deliver managerial efficiencies which translate into educational gains, it was argued there had to be parity between different kinds of schools. Our respondents did not waver in this argument. Looking back over the policy, which has moved further and further away from this founding idea, these interviews thus stand as valuable antidote to ministerial amnesia about the policy's initial purpose and direction at the time the first GM schools were opened.

We also gleaned a great deal about civil servants' professional practice and, as we noted in an earlier paper (Fitz and Halpin, 1991) the unparalleled access they have to ministers. Numerous opportunities, therefore, arise to determine policy details, if not the overall direction of education policy. As one of our informants noted, "ministers rarely put pen to paper"; he then proceeded to describe the circuit of minutes, meetings and redrafting through which policy develops. In this 'policy loop', as we described it, other voices and

other influences were largely excluded. Certainly, this would go some way to explaining why some neo-liberal educationists, such as Sexton, were disappointed that their proposals were not adopted in full. It also explains why it is important, in civil service culture, to be in Whitehall and not in some distant agency in York, and, also why the DfE moved from offices south of the Thames to offices closer to the Downing Street and parliament.

Ministers Talking

We are now almost overwhelmed by ministerial 'memoirs', most notably in the form of 'I was there' accounts of policy-making. These will prove to be significantly important historical documents, private because they provide 'inside' accounts of policy-making in the Thatcher era (e.g. Baker, 1993; Gilmour, 1992; Lawson, 1993; Ridley, 1992). Ministerial readiness to publish however, no doubt for considerable sums of money, belies their general interest in participating in academic research.

In our discussions with civil servants we made clear our intention to seek interviews with education ministers; those in post and their predecessors. We had written to Kenneth Baker, then Secretary of State for Education, in October 1989. It took two years before we were granted interviews Baker, who was then Home Secretary, and with Tim Eggar, Minister of State for Education.

The interview with Kenneth Baker was conducted at the Home Office; he was then Home Secretary. Baker was accompanied by his political adviser, who remained in the room throughout the interview. Prior to the commencement of the interview, for which we ran two tape recorders, Baker established that the interview was attributable. The interview which followed was dominated by Baker.

He produced a fat green file and, leafing through it, proceeded to tell us about the reform of education, the background to it, the need for it

and his part in its history. There are two pages of single spaced interview transcript before the first intervention into his monologue is recorded, and that came from the political adviser. The interview continued in similar fashion. We asked relatively few questions and exerted almost no control over the interview situation.

Baker's performance was skilled. The narrative was persuasive and engrossing. Here was a minister, on his account, persuaded by the prime minister to assume responsibility for, and do something about, education. When he became Education Secretary in May 1986 he noted:

> "I was given a very free hand by Margaret [Thatcher] to come forward with my own ideas on education and she didn't say what she wanted. She said 'Kenneth look at this whole thing. We haven't got it right and we've been in office all this time.' Therefore, from may until the end of that year I started to fashion a group of policies. I started knowing I wanted to do certain things ..... I was aiming to get a paper to Margaret by December 1986. And in December 1986 I sent her a blueprint of all my reforms ..... I also put into the blueprint what I call the 'independent of state schools', the 'opting out' proposals."

And reflecting on the development of a national curriculum, he observed:

> "I think its fair to say that the people in the Department of Education and Science were more sympathetic to that aspect of my reforms than other aspects, because they and the Chief Inspector (of schools) had also come to the conclusion that something had to be done."

This account of events, as it was recounted to us, has also appeared recently in Baker's published memoirs. The 'blue print' setting out his proposals for educational reform appear as an annexe in that volume (Baker, 1993). The excerpts above, however, also reflect accurately Baker's conception of himself as some kind of 'policy hero'. These

were his reforms, authored by him and in seeming isolation from other participants in the policy loop. He was, for example, dismissive about the influence of the New Right 'think tanks' on the educational reforms that were taken forward into legislation.

In response to our question about the continuation of 'think tanks' to policy formulation, he suggested:

> "..... if you are looking at the influence that these various bodies had, I don't believe the Centre for Policy Studies had any significant effect on our thinking. In fact, some of the work done by them didn't chime at all with our work. The Institute of Economic Affairs again did not have a coherent education policy. They did not have a set of ideas. They were very enthusiastic when I started to talk to them about this. They were saying 'this is what we want'. I think they had a vague idea that money ought to follow student and the pupil."

His accounts contained scant acknowledgement, reflected in the exerpts above, that considerable thought had previously been given to a national curriculum and to the local management of schools by the DES and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). Moreover, the 'think tanks' especially the LEA, had produced pamphlets, influential in party thinking about free standing, autonomous state schools. Other evidence in Ball (1990) for example, suggests that the changes in education can only with difficulty be attributed to Baker's initiative.

Any vision of policy-making as a rational process was undermined in an interview with a skilled, ambitious and relative senior member of the cabinet. It was a reminder that reforms happen for quite pragmatic, party political reasons. The importance of the political agendas, that of the government, and the personal ambitions of ministers, as aspects of the policy process came through strongly in this exchange. Educational reforms proceeded, not necessarily because they were needed or because they were right, but also because the private polls

suggested educational reform was a vote winner. That this was primarily an interview with a politician was also made more apparent, however, when the interview was suspended so that we could follow the early evening television news.

As Home Secretary, Baker had been at the House of Commons that day debating not only the dangerous dogs legislation but also arguments about Sunday trading, and, responding to the release of the Tottenham Three. For politicians, especially ministers involved in developing and defending policies on behalf of the government, the news the best indication they have of the importance of their policies. Our interview was thus interrupted while the minister and his political adviser assessed the prominence given to Home Office matters.

At the end of the formal interview, the political adviser invited us to discuss any matters which the Home Secretary had raised and about which we required further clarification. This was a very different encounter, an off-the-record, more direct exchange of views about politics, policies and personalities. It contrasted very much with the Home Secretary's presentation of GM policy, its purposes and its antecedents. The adviser's contribution was a more robust defence of the Home Secretary's role in policy development, that included a less than flattering account of other individuals widely thought to be influential in educational policy-making. It also hinted at the effort required to impress, on a sometimes reluctant DES, the direction the Secretary of State wanted the reforms to take. Because these have since been graphically described in Baker's memoirs we can mention them here without fear of breaching confidentiality.

When we interviewed Baker he was, as it turned out, at the pinnacle of his career, the holder of one of the three great offices of state. We wondered, prior to the interview why he had granted us an interview. On the surface, there was little of benefit to him in giving an hour of his time to academic researchers. The interview perhaps gives some

clues. Baker's account constructed his place in the history of educational change by placing himself at the centre, as the author of an Act which fundamentally changed the landscape of educational provision and the values which underpinned it. But what we were also hearing was the story of the self as a reflexive project, in Giddens' sense of the term. (1) We are not what we are but what we make ourselves. Thus, individuals build and rebuild a sense of identity (Giddens, 1991). In this interview and in his memoirs, Baker places himself as the author of historical change by diminishing in the script all the other social, political and cultural forces which were in play.

The Baker interview, however, was more relaxed and expansive than the interview conducted with the then Minister of State for Education, Tim Eggar. The differences between them probably arise from civil servants' concerns to protect serving ministers in their department, compared with those who are no longer engaged in education policy (see Ponting, 1986, 30-63). In addition, Eggar had not been involved in formulating the policy and so confined his remarks to his administration of a policy he had inherited and to some of the issues involved in taking it forward.

The interview took place in less than satisfactory circumstances for the researchers and the researched. Although we had arranged to see the minister for an hour, on arrival we were informed that he was likely to be called away within at any time for consultations with the Secretary of State. The exchanges, therefore, were rather more hurried than we would have wished. We also edited the schedule as the interview proceeded, in an attempt to give priority to what we thought were the key questions. For our part, we were also conscious of three civil servants taking extensive notes of the questions and the minister's responses. That also put the respondent under pressure to get things right, to stick to the department's brief. The responses were similar in character and purpose to the civil servants' replies we spoke of earlier: hold the line and explain the departmental position. Judged from a

civil service perspective, the minister's performance was admirable in so far as he held his brief and outlined the policy's purpose and direction with clarity and conviction. We learned very little that was new. This was disappointing, as the policy at that time was undergoing a very important review.

In research terms, the value of this interview lies in its contrast with Baker's. Their relative positions in government determined the interview context, and also the kind of account each was able to construct. On the one hand, we have Baker's narration of the policy's history and his part in its making. His seniority confers on him the power to narrate a personalised account. On the other hand, Eggar is confined to an administrator's explanation of government policy in the company of civil service 'minders'. Again, this interview told us rather more about the arcane rules, regulations, of Whitehall and its hierarchies, than it did about GM schools policy.

Ponting has argued that "the real amateurs in government are ministers" (Ponting, 1986, 31). Their instincts, he noted, lead them to emphasise the short term political aspects of the job. He concedes, however, they are great talkers. The administrator's lofty judgement of ministers' involvement in long-term policy development emphasises the difference between their respective aims and responsibilities. Throughout our research, however, we were struck by the similarities, at the interactional level, between the administrators and the politicians. The skills they exercised in research situations, in their presentation of self, via language, dress and their orientation to the business of governing, had much in common. In our experience, and in contrast to Ponting, there were no 'amateurs' at the level of policy-making we have described, and this is perhaps the key challenge of conducting qualitative research with the powerful in elite settings.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed some of the problems of conducting qualitative research in elite settings. The barriers which have to be overcome are, in a large measure, created by the formal and informal conventions which screen off the routines of education policy-making from the public and the academic gaze. The course of our inquiries demonstrates how contingent and conditional researchers' access is to those involved directly in the policy-making process at the centre. In our case, and without any claim to membership by birth, education or other affiliation to the 'establishment, it required sponsorship by a well-regarded research council, and the help of key persons. It was also assisted by a research design based on conventional and commonly understood research protocols and methods, promises of confidentiality, and sufficient cultural and social awareness to know how to play the game well enough to remain in the field.

The obvious danger of the relationship of researchers to the researched in this context, as we earlier acknowledge, is that they simply end up reproducing the discourse of the powerful. This is likely to be the dominant discourse in the fieldwork phase of qualitative research in elite settings. Thus, there is always the problem of uncritically accepting elite narratives as the authentic, valid account of how policy was formulated and why. There are, however, resources within a well-established framework of qualitative research practice to ease researchers' out of this difficulty.

First, interviews elicit accounts which provide transcripts of the utterances of individuals located in contexts which generate rules about what can and cannot be said. These accounts are helpful in the reconstruction of the processes of policy-making, and more so, if they can be set alongside other sources. Interviews, nevertheless, express individual perspectives on events and, as such carry with them

undeclared interests. Interviews are unlikely ever to yield the whole story.

Second, and following on from the point above, the context within which interviewees speak must be described. In this chapter, for example, we have outlined the constitutional and conventional rules which gave rise to the civil servants' 'voice' and which also regulated what they could say in a research environment. The context generates not only the nature of their accounts, including their mode of its expression, but also provides a basis for the evaluation of these interviews as evidence.

Third, difficulties associated with access to administrators and politicians, the conditions placed on interviewers concerning the form and the kinds of questions which can be posed, and the conventions of politeness and deference within the interview itself, are expressions of the boundaries between the administrative and academic 'fields', in Bourdieu's sense of the term. Policy research which involves qualitative methods of inquiry is thus always likely to evoke contests over boundary maintenance, which are in themselves useful reminders to researchers to look again at the nature and purpose of the boundary and whose interests are best served by its existence. It can be argued then, that the encounters are as important as the words in the transcript in terms of revealing the structures within which policy is formulated and developed.

The research experiences we have described above were not always comfortable for us, but on the other hand, they were always seductively exciting. We would argue that it is worth doing, and that it is a course of inquiry we will continue to undertake and we would encourage others to do so. For if nothing else, it gives rise to situations in which policy-makers are asked to render public accounts of themselves and their actions. In addition, research activities in elite settings has other beneficial effects. These encounters have the

capacity to identify the rules, generated by the elite, concerning who may speak and who may not, what knowledge is for public consumption and that which is not, and the values which are to be preserved and those which are not. Power, in these terms, resides in and is exercised through, the classificatory framework which the elites have generated. Researching the powerful, or 'studying up' therefore, inevitably involves an analysis of the rules they create and reproduce, and the context within which they were generated.

Note

1. We are indebted to John Beynon, University of Glamorgan, for this insight.

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